
Running the Gauntlet: the Manuscript Submission and Review Process

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**Manuscript: something submitted in
haste and returned at leisure**

- Oliver Herford

What happens when a paper is submitted?



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graph TD; A[Screening of paper for obvious violations of submission or format guidelines] --> B[Quick review by 1 to 2 editors who reject or assign to another editor for in-depth scrutiny]; B --> C[Assigned editor rejects summarily or sends paper out to 2 to 4 peer reviewers]; C --> D[Reviewers provide critiques and recommendations by deadline]; D --> E[Assigned editor makes decision or refers paper for vote by the larger editorial team];
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Screening of paper for obvious violations of submission or format guidelines

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Types of submission outcomes



- Rejected without peer review
- Rejected after peer review
- Accepted with no or minimal changes
- Invited to revise and resubmit
- Invited to prepare a 'major' revision

How long does it take to get a decision?



- Rejection can be quick (as little as a day);
- Other decisions may take 1 to 9 months
- Cumulative time with resubmission may be > 1 year

Sample of twenty first-author submissions: what happened?



- 1 accepted by 1st journal, minimal changes requested
- 4 accepted by 1st journal after revise and resubmit
- 1 asked to revise & resubmit by 1st journal, then revised further after a phone call with editor-in-chief
- 1 rejected without review from 1st journal but with editor note -- later resubmitted & accepted by same journal

Sample of twenty first-author submissions: what happened?



- 6 rejected by 1st journal, then accepted by 2nd journal
- 1 invited to revise & resubmit by 1st journal but then rejected -- then submitted and accepted by 2nd journal
- 4 rejected by 2 journals, then accepted by 3rd journal
- 1 rejected by 3 journals, then accepted by 4th journal
- 1 rejected by 8 journals before accepted by 9th journal

Strategies for the submission process



- “Aim high” and prepare for rejection or try to publish quickly?
- “Persist and publish” rather than “procrastinate and perish”?
- Resubmit quickly to a new journal, or address previous critiques first?

How to respond to reviewers' critiques?



The straightforward approach:

- Consider whether you think the reviewer's recommendation would strengthen the paper
- If you agree with the recommendation, make the requested change
- If you don't agree, then don't make the change, and contest the critique

How to respond to reviewers' critiques?



The pragmatic approach:

- Make every single recommended change to the manuscript that you can possibly make
- For the (few) changes you can't make, find a way to make some other concession
- Don't change anything in the paper that you haven't been asked to change

The “Reviewer #3” phenomenon



Dealing with criticism from reviewers



- 1) Get mad for a day or two, then get over it
- 2) Choose your manuscript battles wisely
- 3) Take responsibility for your reviewers' confusion
- 4) Remember that flattery costs you nothing
- 5) Know your audience (editor versus reviewer)

Drafting the response letter



- Re-list each reviewer critique, then indicate your response immediately afterwards
- Don't offer an extended explanation – focus on the specific action that you're taking
- Make it easy for the editor to review the changes without going back to the manuscript

Example 1: Reviewer appears to miss the relevant information

Critique: “This paper does not provide necessary information about early termination or loss to follow-up. What was the discontinuation rate, and what were the reasons for discontinuation?”

Example 1 response



Response: “In our original Figure 1, we indicated the number of participants who discontinued medication in each treatment group and the major reasons for discontinuation. Recognizing that some readers may not think to consult Figure 1, however, we have now added a statement to the text of the results, in which we point out that 29 women in the fesoterodine group and 30 in the placebo group discontinued medication early.”

Example 2: Reviewer feels the conclusions are not supported by the data

Critique: “The conclusion is too strong for the data. While there are interesting trends, in order for the authors to conclude that measurement of serum estradiol identifies women who may benefit from ultra-low dose estrogen, they should at least perform an ROC analysis and provide data on the sensitivity/specificity/AUC for the ROC.”

Example 2 response



Response: “We appreciate this reviewer’s concern that our stated conclusions may be too strong for the data. We have removed our original statement that measurement of serum estradiol levels may be useful in identifying women who are most likely to benefit from therapy. We now state that, ‘These findings suggest that the beneficial effects of low-dose estrogen therapy on postmenopausal women’s skeletal health may be strongly influenced by women’s endogenous estrogen levels.’ (p. 11)”

Example 3: Reviewer asks for new variables or new analyses

Critique: “Why were measures of lower body strength and gait speed not included? These measures are important given the relationship of lower extremity functioning and urgency-type urinary incontinence.”

Example 3 response



Response: “Thank you for the suggestion. Walking speed is a complex measure of physical mobility that includes a variety of factors such as balance, energy, and coordination. Because our analysis focuses specifically on body composition and muscle strength, we chose to include quadriceps strength (as opposed to walking speed) as a measure of lower extremity body strength, and have now added information on this measure to the manuscript.”

Example 3 editor follow-up



Response: “The reviewer, the associate editor, and myself, all experienced in the field of incontinence, are puzzled by your reluctance to include other measures of mobility – rather than limiting to quadriceps strength. Please address this issue in the revision. Thank you.”

What if the reviewers get a second look?



Reviewer reassessment: “The authors have been responsive to the earlier critiques and have submitted a significantly improved manuscript.”

What if the reviewers get a second look?



Reviewer reassessment: “The authors did not provide any response to several of my comments (i.e., nothing in the email and no revisions in the manuscript), and in particular, do not address the question of missing data (my comment #5 for Methods).... I think there is very substantial risk for bias that is not being accounted for. I am not comfortable with recommending that this paper be accepted in its current form, and request further statistical review.”

Questions for our editor panel



What are some common mistakes made by authors in preparing a manuscript that result in their work not receiving the consideration it deserves?

Questions for our editor panel



What factors other than the reviewers' critiques or recommendations do you weigh in deciding whether to accept or reject a manuscript?

Questions for our editor panel



Can you think of an example of a manuscript that was rejected by your journal that you feel should have been accepted, or one accepted that you feel should have been rejected? If so, why?

Questions for our editor panel



Are there situations in which it may be appropriate for authors to appeal a journal's decision to reject a paper? If so, what are they, and how should authors go about this?

Additional questions from the audience

Thanks again:



- Deborah Grady, MD, MPH
- Mitch Feldman, MD, MPhil
- Michael Callaham, MD
- Philip Rosenthal, MD
- Jay Levy, MD